



Ordering the Islands? Pacific Responses to China's Strategic Narratives

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Abstract

Metropolitan powers are concerned that China is seeking to influence Pacific Island countries and reshape Pacific Islands' regional order in its favour. But there is a risk that the effectiveness of China's efforts has been overinterpreted by metropolitan powers. In this article we analyse the effectiveness of one element of China's activities: the deployment of narrative power. We do this by examining the reception and role of China's strategic narratives in the Pacific Islands. We analyse how China's strategic narratives have been interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised by Pacific Island countries and leaders using case studies of three key regional states: Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa. We conclude that while Fijian, Solomon Islands, and Samoan leaders have incorporated elements of China's strategic narratives into their discourse, they have done so using their own interpretations and, at times, instrumentalised those narratives for their own purposes. We conclude that this suggests that narrative power is more limited than it is often assumed. However, we acknowledge that narrative power may have indirect effects, with China's narratives in the Pacific Islands region, as well as their instrumental adoption by Pacific Island countries, motivating changes in the policies and narratives of metropolitan powers.

Introduction

In the context of building strategic competition, the United States, Australia, and other metropolitan powers are concerned about China's activities in the Pacific Islands region. The analysis underpinning these concerns has focused primarily on whether China's expenditure of material resources—whether they be aid, loans, scholarships, investment,

and the activities of state-owned corporations—can reshape regional order in its favour.¹ Analysts have argued that Chinese “influence and interference” is “quite brazen”, with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) characterised as a tool of “grand strategy”.² They have said that China has the objective of “counterattack[ing] the perceived US containment of China by opening up a “new battlefield” for “political influence and economic competition in the South Pacific” and “ensur[ing] China’s rise at the systemic (global) level”.³ In particular, analysts have expressed concern about the risk of China engaging in “debt-trap diplomacy”, whereby it could instrumentalise its civilian infrastructure projects for military purposes if Pacific countries are unable to service their loans,⁴ with China’s military base in Djibouti a frequently mentioned analogy.⁵ Although these claims have been debunked,⁶ they remain influential in Washington, Canberra, and other metropolitan capitals.

In this article, we shift our focus to exploring China’s efforts to use ideational resources in the Pacific Islands by examining the reception of Chinese strategic narratives in the region. We do this by analysing how these narratives have been interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised by Pacific leaders. We therefore join the “narrative turn” in International Relations,⁷ which is based on the observation that “narratives are central to human relations”⁸ as they are “how human beings make meaning”.⁹ While power is frequently understood as the use of material resources, such as military and economic capabilities to produce effects,¹⁰ narrative power is an ideational resource that can produce effects through “ascribing meaning and mobilizing collective action”.¹¹

In respect of the Pacific Islands, analysts have argued that China has sought to advance its foreign policy by using ideational resources such as its “soft power assets”, based on the “intense and extremely active promotion of China through diplomacy and culture”.¹² It has been claimed that China’s “South–South cooperation narrative”, whereby it seeks to “cultivate the idea that, like the island states, it too is a developing country”, has built “a level of engagement, respect, and esteem that’s deepening the well of Beijing’s soft power in the region”.¹³ This has led other metropolitan powers to deploy counter-narratives, with, for example, the USA now narrating itself as a “Pacific nation”, Australia framing

¹ Denghua Zhang, “China’s Influence and Local Perceptions: the Case of Pacific Island Countries,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 5 (2022), pp. 575–95; Joanne Wallis et al., “Framing China in the Pacific Islands,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 5 (2022), pp. 522–45.

² Peter J. Connolly, “Engaging China’s New Foreign Policy in the South Pacific,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 5 (2016), pp. 484–505.

³ Yu Lei and Sophia Sui, “China-Pacific Island Countries Strategic Partnership: China’s Strategy to Reshape the Regional Order,” *East Asia*, Vol. 39, Iss. 1 (2022), pp. 81–96, 83.

⁴ Sam Parker and Gabrielle Chefitz, *Debtbook Diplomacy: China’s Strategic Leveraging of its Newfound Economic Influence and the Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy* (Boston: Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, 2018).

⁵ Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, “Introduction: The Return of Great Power Competition,” in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, eds., *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), pp. 1–40.

⁶ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, *Debunking the Myth of “Debt-trap Diplomacy”* (London: Chatham House, 2022).

⁷ Geoffrey Roberts, “History, Theory and the Narrative Turn in IR,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2006), pp. 703–14.

⁸ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 1.

⁹ Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 10.

¹⁰ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: the Struggle for Peace and Power* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

¹¹ Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, “Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2019), pp. 387–406, 390–1.

¹² Barthélémy Courmont and Harmony Delhalle, *A China’s Soft Power in the Pacific: The Example of the Solomon Islands and the Pacific Games 2023 Project* (Paris: Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques, 2022).

¹³ Richard Herr, *Chinese Influence in the Pacific Islands: The Yin and Yang of Soft Power* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019), p. 4.

itself as a member of the “Pacific family”, and New Zealand emphasising its “Pacific identity”. These narratives have been accompanied by significant increases in the expenditure of material resources. Seeking to capitalise on this interest, Pacific countries have also worked together within the Pacific Islands Forum, the region’s preeminent multilateral institution, to strategically deploy the narrative of the “Blue Pacific” to influence partner countries to adopt policies that reflect regional priorities.¹⁴

There is a risk that the reception and impact of China’s narratives in the Pacific Islands has been overinterpreted. Indeed, there has been little scholarly analysis of how “narratives are received, interpreted, and become meaningful to audiences” in the Pacific Islands or beyond.¹⁵ Few studies have attempted “theorising or tracing how one state’s strategic narrative is received by a target state, and how this comes to be appropriated in their subsequent strategic narratives”.¹⁶ We therefore follow Thomas Colley and Carolijn van Noort, who have sought to analyse “whether states adopt the strategic narrative of others as they justify foreign policies”.¹⁷

To analyse how China’s narratives been interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised by Pacific countries and their leaders, we begin by outlining our analytical framework, which draws on the literature on narrative power and strategic narratives. We then identify the three primary narratives that China has deployed in the Pacific Islands: historical/colonial, South-South cooperation, and the BRI. We then analyse the discourse of the leaders of three Pacific countries—Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa—to identify how they have received those narratives, including how they have interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised them when justifying their foreign policies. We conclude by arguing that while Fijian, Solomon Islands, and Samoan leaders have, at times, incorporated elements of China’s strategic narratives into their discourse when justifying their foreign policies, they have done so using their own interpretations and, at times, instrumentalised those narratives for their own purposes. This suggests that narrative power is more limited than it is often assumed, although it may have indirect effects, with China’s narratives in the Pacific Islands region, as well as their instrumental adoption by Pacific countries, motivating changes in the policies and narratives of metropolitan powers.

Setting the Scene

From 26 May to 4 June 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi toured seven Pacific countries with which China has diplomatic relations, held virtual meetings with three more, and convened the second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Minister Meeting in Fiji. During his tour, Wang signed more than 50 bilateral agreements. But Wang failed in his major goal: getting Pacific countries to sign-up to a multilateral economic and security agreement and five-year action plan.¹⁸ Instead, Pacific leaders stated that they would prefer to consider the proposal under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum, of which 16 island countries are

¹⁴ Joanne Wallis, Maima Koro, and Corey O’Dwyer, “The ‘Blue Pacific’ Strategic Narrative: Rhetorical Action, Acceptance, Entrapment, and Appropriation?”, *The Pacific Review* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2253377>.

¹⁵ Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, “The EU’s Struggle for a Strategic Narrative on China,” in Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng, eds., *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 19–44, 29.

¹⁶ Thomas Colley and Carolijn van Noort, *Strategic Narratives, Ontological Security and Global Policy: Responses to China’s Belt and Road Initiative* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ Anna Powles, “Five Things We learned About China’s Ambitions for the Pacific from the Leaked Deal,” *The Guardian*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/five-things-we-learned-about-chinas-ambitions-for-the-pacific-from-the-leaked-deal#:~:text=The%20deal%20also%20shows%20that,Forum%20Biketawa%20Declaration%20to%20maritime>.

members, along with Australia and New Zealand. The Chinese government later released a position paper indicating that it will continue to pursue the deal.¹⁹

Therefore, metropolitan powers remain concerned about China's activities in the Pacific Islands region. This concern had grown after (unsubstantiated) rumours in April 2018 that China was in talks to build a military base at a port it was funding in Vanuatu. It escalated when Papua New Guinea became the first Pacific country to sign-up to the BRI in June 2018 (all Pacific countries that maintain diplomatic relations with China subsequently signed-up), and grew further in 2019, when Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. China then unsuccessfully attempted to lease Tulagi Island, home to a Second World War Japanese naval base, in Solomon Islands. In 2021 it was reported that China offered to upgrade a strategically located airstrip that had hosted military aircraft during the Second World War on Kanton Island in Kiribati. These concerns peaked with the April 2022 news that China and Solomon Islands had entered into a security agreement.

Following the announcement of the China-Solomon Islands security agreement, the USA quickly sent National Security Council Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink to Solomon Islands. While there, Kritenbrink commented that: "We have respect for the Solomon Islands' sovereignty, but we also wanted to let them know that if steps were taken [by China] to establish a de facto permanent military presence, power projection capabilities or a military installation, then we would have significant concerns and we would very naturally respond to those concerns".²⁰ This comment reflected the interpretation by several Australian²¹ and American²² commentators that the agreement paved the way for a Chinese military presence in Solomon Islands, long assumed to be the ultimate goal of China's perceived efforts at "building its influence" in the region.²³ A Chinese military presence in the region would threaten the air and sea approaches to Australia and New Zealand, and render vulnerable American military bases, particularly in Guam and Hawai'i.

Kritenbrink's comment also reflected a perception that has developed since 2017 within the US government, in particular, that China is a "revisionist power" that uses both military and non-military tools "coercively" in pursuit of "Indo-Pacific regional hegemony... and, ultimately global pre-eminence".²⁴ The perception that China is seeking to build its geopolitical influence has also been developed in the academic literature,²⁵ with one study

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MFAPRC), "China's Position Paper on Mutual Respect and Common Development with Pacific Island Countries," 30 May 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220531_10694923.html.

²⁰ Phelim Kine, "U.S. Turned the Screws on Solomon Islands to Counter China," *Politico*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-china-watcher/2022/04/28/u-s-turns-the-screws-on-solomon-islands-to-counter-china-00028449>.

²¹ Michael Shoebridge, "Decision to Bring China's Military into the South Pacific in the Hands of Solomon Islands PM," *The Strategist*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/decision-to-bring-chinas-military-into-the-south-pacific-in-the-hands-of-solomon-islands-pm/>.

²² Patricia M. Kim, "Does the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact Portend a more Interventionist Beijing?," *Brookings*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/does-the-china-solomon-islands-security-pact-portend-a-more-interventionist-beijing/>.

²³ Jonathan Pryke, "The Risks of China's Ambitions in the South Pacific," *Brookings*, 20 July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-chinas-ambitions-in-the-south-pacific/>; Herr, *Chinese Influence in the Pacific Islands*; Brian Harding and Camille Pohle-Anderson, "China's Search for a Permanent Military Presence in the Pacific Islands," *United States Institute of Peace*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/chinas-search-permanent-military-presence-pacific-islands>.

²⁴ Department of Defense of the United States, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 2019), p. 8.

²⁵ Peter Ferdinand, "Westward Ho – the China Dream and 'One Belt, One Road': Chinese Foreign Policy Under Xi Jinping," *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (2016), pp. 941–57; Xiaoyu Pu, "One Belt, One Road: Visions and Challenges of China's Geoeconomic Strategy," *Mainland China Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (2016), pp. 111–26; Yong Wang, "Offensive for Defensive: The Belt and Road Initiative and China's New Grand Strategy," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 29,

concluding that: “the goal is to weave neighbouring countries into a Sino-centric network of economic, political, cultural, and security relations. Beijing’s grand strategy thus is to reconstitute the regional order – and eventually global order – with new governance ideas, norms, and rules”.²⁶

We have chosen to focus on the Pacific Islands region because the decision of Pacific leaders to reject the proposed Chinese regional pact demonstrates that there are limits to what China can achieve. This highlights that Pacific countries are not “objects” of China’s narrative power, but instead “agents themselves taking part in the construction” of “narratives about Chinese power and their relationship to it”.²⁷ Pacific countries have considerably less material power than China, but as we demonstrate below, they can interpret China’s narratives in ways that differ from their intended meaning and exercise their agency to instrumentalise those narratives for their own domestic and international purposes.

Analytical Framework

Our analytical framework draws on the literature on strategic narratives and specifically on China’s deployment of narrative power. As others have observed, narratives differ from discourse, “the representational practices through which meanings are generated”,²⁸ because narratives consist of storytelling intended to “connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation”.²⁹ That is, narrative is “storified discourse”.³⁰ Particularly important to narrative is plot, which is “a selection of temporally and causally linked events through which the narrative plays out over time”, as it “structures a narrative, turning an otherwise disparate set of events into a coherent whole”.³¹ An analysis focused on narratives thus assumes that “stories are central elements of human cognition which significantly impact social and political behaviour, including the way in which individuals make meaning of political conflict or social transformation”.³² Therefore, we use the term “narratives” when we refer to the three specific Chinese strategic narratives we have identified, and to discourse when we are referring to the corpus of statements, text, and language being articulated by different state actors that we have analysed.

Political actors are said to use strategic narratives to “construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors”.³³ If those actors can get their domestic political constituency, and/or other states and actors to “buy into” their strategic narrative, this can “shape their interests, their identity, and their understanding of how international relations work and where it is heading”.³⁴ There are three categories of strategic narrative: “international system narratives” that “describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how the system works”; “identity narratives” that “set out what the story of a political actor is, what values

No. 3 (2016), pp. 455–63; Yongjin Zhang, “Introduction: Dynamism and Contention: Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (2016), pp. 769–72.

²⁶ William A. Callahan, “China’s ‘Asia Dream’: The Belt Road Initiative and the New Regional Order,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2016), pp. 226–43.

²⁷ Alice D. Ba, “China’s ‘Belt and Road’ in Southeast Asia: Constructing the Strategic Narrative in Singapore,” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2019), pp. 249–72, 250.

²⁸ Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 125.

²⁹ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*, p. 7.

³⁰ Laura Shepherd, *Narrating the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Logics of Global Governance* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), p. 9.

³¹ Colley and van Noort, *Strategic Narratives*, p. 37.

³² Phillip L. Hammack and Andrew Pilecki, “Methodological Approaches in Political Psychology: Discourse and Narrative,” in P. Nesbitt-Larking et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Political Psychology* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), pp. 72–89, 82.

³³ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*, p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

it has, and what goals it has”; and “policy narratives that set out why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished”.³⁵ Consequently, “narrative power” has been identified as an element of soft power, with a narrative characterised as powerful if it becomes dominant and “makes sense to and therefore resonates with most of a target audience”.³⁶ The attraction of narrative power is that it “can be so effective that it goes largely unnoticed”, “persuading actors to accept policies and norms that contradict their ‘real interests’” or producing a narrative context in which certain constructions of actors, their identities, and by extension their interests, come to be taken for granted.³⁷

The power of a strategic narrative is constrained by the boundaries of the master narratives, “the grand narratives of our time”, such as “economic development or the expansion of human rights”.³⁸ These master narratives are “deeply institutionalised” and therefore “fundamentally order international policies”,³⁹ as they act as “background knowledge” that constructs “a particular kind of world in which certain things are recognised as true”.⁴⁰ These master narratives, along with “prevailing domestic and international understandings and expectations of that state, readings of its history, and evaluations of its reputation” set the parameters of a state’s narratives.⁴¹ Indeed, after studying competing Chinese and American narratives, scholars have concluded that their efficacy was both “enabled, and constrained, by pre-existing master narratives integral to the current US-led world order”.⁴² Narrative power is also constrained by “narrative resistance”, whereby actors construct and disseminate “counter-narratives that challenge” influential strategic narratives.⁴³ More generally, narrative power is constrained by the fact that “perfect communication is impossible” and therefore “hearing is not the same as listening, and listening is not the same as understanding”.⁴⁴ This means that the audience of any narrative are not passive; they will exercise their agency, and apply their own perspectives, biases, and heuristics to interpret that narrative. Therefore, any analysis of the interpretation, adoption, and/or instrumentalisation of narratives must acknowledge the complexity, context, and culture of the target audience. This includes considering the respective languages of both the speaker of the narrative and the audience, the consequences of translating narratives between languages, as well as unspoken cultural and historical understandings. As with all analyses of power, it is also difficult to distinguish between the ability of strategic narratives to generate effects compared to the use of other resources, including material ones. It is also difficult to distinguish between the effects generated by strategic narratives and other factors such as domestic political dynamics and broader geopolitical factors. Nevertheless, given the analytical focus on strategic narratives by both scholars and practitioners, there is merit in seeking to determine how they are received by target state actors.

Indeed, despite these difficulties, there is a developing literature that analyses how China has sought to exercise narrative power.⁴⁵ Some scholars have concluded that “China is

³⁵ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, “Introduction,” in Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, eds., *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), pp. 1–22, 8.

³⁶ Hagström and Gustafsson, “Narrative Power,” p. 391.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

³⁸ Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, “Narrative in Political Science,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 1, Iss. (1998), pp. 315–31, 326.

³⁹ Hagström and Gustafsson, “Narrative Power,” p. 393.

⁴⁰ Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 10.

⁴¹ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*, p. 8.

⁴² Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, “The Limitations of Strategic Narratives: The Sino-American Struggle over the Meaning of COVID-19,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2021), pp. 415–49, 417.

⁴³ Hagström and Gustafsson, “Narrative Power,” p. 396.

⁴⁴ Ben O’Loughlin, Alister Miskimmon, and Laura Roselle, “Strategic Narratives: Methods and Ethics,” in Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, eds., *Forging the World*, pp. 23–56, 25.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Jean-Marc Blanchard, “Probing China’s Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI): An Examination of MSRI Narratives,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2017), pp. 246–68; Lutgard Lams, “Examining Strategic Narratives in Chinese Official Discourse under Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 23,

not currently seeking to overthrow the existing international order. Instead, it intends to reform it to better suit its own values and interests”.⁴⁶ Others have concluded that “Chinese leaders and elites... have actively produced their counternarratives of the world order, arguing and pushing for the restructuring of the existing international order”,⁴⁷ and have therefore “employed a multifaceted narrative strategy to influence existing norms and create new ones”,⁴⁸ as part of a “diplomatic strategy to alter global perception and their possible influences on the emerging world order”.⁴⁹ It has been argued that China uses “geocultural power” to project an identity as a promoter of peace, harmony, and dialogue, crafting narratives of “trade, open-borders, cosmopolitanism, and inter-cultural dialogue”.⁵⁰

After considering how China has attempted to “build up its discursive power”, Jinghan Zeng concluded that China’s narratives “suffer from the problem of being overloaded – they become far too broad to be meaningful”.⁵¹ Indeed, Zeng has argued that “Chinese foreign policy concepts should be understood as political slogans rather than concrete strategic plans”, and that therefore many analyses of China’s narratives “tend to overinterpret the strategic rationale of those Chinese concepts”,⁵² particularly as some analysts “have pre-existing views and then selectively look for Chinese literature to support those views”.⁵³ Yet he says that analysing China’s narratives still has value, as they “function as slogans to signal not only China’s new vision but also their implied power relations; in other words, the latter is a political gesture to assert China’s regional (if not global) leadership”, and to set regional and global agendas.⁵⁴

Methodology

To conduct our study, we used discourse analysis techniques⁵⁵ to analyse how the leaders of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised China’s strategic narratives when publicly justifying their foreign policies. To identify the narratives that China has deployed in the Pacific Islands region, we began by analysing official Chinese discourse, including public statements and policies adopted by the government in the form of official communications. We began our analysis in 2012 because our data collection has focused on official newsletters published by the Research Center for Pacific Island Countries (RCPIC) at Liaocheng University in China. Since 2012, research newsletters (*Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun* or *Taipingyang Daoguo Zixun*) from RCPIC have covered a wide

No. 3 (2018), pp. 387–411; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Zeng, eds., *One Belt, One Road, One Story?*; Carolijn van Noort, *China’s Communication of the Belt and Road Initiative: Silk Road and Infrastructure Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁴⁶ Yi Edward Yang, “China’s Strategic Narratives in Global Governance Reform under Xi Jinping,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 30, No. 128 (2021), pp. 299–313, 304; Yunhan Zhang and Jan Orbie, “Strategic Narratives in China’s Climate Policy: Analysing Three Phases in China’s Discourse Coalition,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2021), pp. 1–28.

⁴⁷ Rex Li, “Contending Narratives of the International Order: US/Chinese Discursive Power and Its Effects on the UK,” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2019), pp. 349–85, 375.

⁴⁸ Yang, “China’s Strategic Narratives in Global Governance Reform under Xi Jinping,” p. 300.

⁴⁹ Yung-Yung Chang, “The Post-Pandemic World: Between Constitutionalized and Authoritarian Orders – China’s Narrative-Power Play in the Pandemic Era,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 2 (2021), pp. 27–65, 28.

⁵⁰ Tim Winter, “Geocultural Power: China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (2020), pp. 1376–99, 1384.

⁵¹ Jinghan Zeng, “Does Europe Matter? The Role of Europe in Chinese Narratives of ‘One Belt One Road’ and ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 5 (2017), pp. 1162–76, 1173.

⁵² Jinghan Zeng, *Slogan Politics: Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy Concepts* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1–2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Dunn and Neumann, *Undertaking Discourse Analysis*.

range of topics, such as Chinese diplomats in the Pacific (commonly known as visit diplomacy),⁵⁶ conferences among the leaders from China and Pacific countries, policies, aid, and cooperation. Although these newsletters may not represent an exhaustive corpus of official discourse, given the potential for government censorship and filtering by the scholars who compile them, they contain many authoritative primary sources and provide a centralised source of Chinese news about the region.

Most of our translated data consisted of high-level official communication, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MFAPRC), Chinese embassies, and consulates. Since the original Chinese and official English translations target the same audiences, they generally convey similar meanings. However, the difference between official Chinese foreign policy statements and their English translations is a common challenge when analysing China's foreign policy because they may have nuanced meanings.⁵⁷ Our analysis focused on the discourse of Chinese leaders and officials, and as with all states, their language may not always reflect their true intentions. The challenge of determining whether state elites mean or believe what they say is heightened by the opaque political contexts of non-democratic states. However, we have followed the advice to "avoid focusing on unanswerable questions about actors' motives and to examine instead what actors say, in what context, and to what audiences."⁵⁸ That is, we are not interested in discovering China's motives, but instead in identifying what narratives Chinese leaders and officials have chosen to articulate. We also acknowledge that China is not a "unitary actor"; rather, there are multiple actors "loosely associated with 'China'", each capable of "representing different agencies" at various levels with different interests.⁵⁹

As noted, we identified three primary strategic narratives that Chinese leaders and officials have articulated in the Pacific Islands region. To analyse how these narratives have been received, we then used discourse analysis techniques to analyse how the leaders of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa interpreted, adopted, and/or instrumentalised China's narratives when justifying their foreign policies. Again, our data came from each state's official discourse, including public statements and policies adopted by the respective governments. An important aspect of our analysis was cultural literacy, with the analysis of each of China's, Fiji's, Solomon Islands', and Samoa's discourse conducted by a national of the country in question. This meant that we were able to consider how each Pacific leaders' interpretations had been shaped by history, contemporary international relations, domestic political interests, but also by cultural and societal understandings, norms, and signals. It also meant that we were able to analyse sources in each countries' language and in English.

We chose our three case studies as each plays a key role in the region: Fiji as the host of many regional institutions, Solomon Islands as the country closest to China, and Samoa as an assertive foreign policy player. Fiji has a population of approximately 930 000 people and was ranked 99 (out of 191) on the 2022 Human Development Index (HDI), meaning that it is considered to have a "high" level of human development. Solomon Islands has a population of approximately 724 000 people and was ranked 155 on the HDI, meaning that it has a "medium" level of human development. Samoa has a population of approximately 222 000 people and was ranked 111 on the HDI, meaning that, like Fiji, it is considered to have a "high" level of human development. Both Fiji and Solomon Islands are in the geographic and cultural sub-region of Melanesia, and Samoa is in Polynesia. Given their

⁵⁶ Denghua Zhang, "China's Diplomacy in the Pacific: Interests, Means and Implications," *Security Challenges*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2017), pp. 32–53.

⁵⁷ Sabine Mokry, "What is Lost in Translation? Differences between Chinese Foreign Policy Statements and Their Official English Translations," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2022), pp. 1–18.

⁵⁸ Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2007), pp. 35–66.

⁵⁹ Denghua Zhang, "China's Motives, Influence and Prospects in Pacific Island Countries: Views of Chinese Scholars," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2022), pp. 33–59.

locations, Australia is the metropolitan state with which Fiji and Solomon Islands have had their closest relations, while Samoa has had its closest relations with New Zealand. There are nine other independent states in the Pacific Islands region, as well as other territories, that span across 30% of the surface of the earth and consist of a range of atolls and islands, as well as the much larger territory of Papua New Guinea (which also has a considerably higher population, with upper estimates of 10 million people). The region is characterised by diversity, including of languages, cultures, sociopolitical organisation (although all states are democracies), economic development, and diplomatic relations, with several states in compacts of free association with either the US or New Zealand, and several territories of the US, France, or New Zealand. Therefore, while our analysis of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa may be indicative of how China's strategic narratives have been received in the region, it is impossible to draw definitive generalisations given the diversity of the region.

What are China's Narratives in the Pacific?

Historical/Colonial

Our first identified narrative deployed by China is an international system narrative that describes the world as being structured to position states such as China and Pacific countries, that have shared historical stories of colonial oppression, in contradistinction to metropolitan states such as the US and Australia, which were (or still are) colonial powers. This narrative gained prominence in the lead-up to Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Fiji in November 2014. Approximately a week before Xi's visit, the Chinese Ambassador to Fiji published a media article in which he argued that: "due to long-term colonial plunder and geographical constraints, economic development of Pacific Island countries has fallen relatively behind".⁶⁰ The ambassador to Vanuatu also published a media article which claimed that China and Pacific countries share "similar historical experiences" and have "common ideals and pursuits".⁶¹ Xi then published an article in the Fijian media that echoed these ideas.⁶² This narrative developed during 2015, with the Chinese ambassador to Samoa arguing that China has "fallen victim to imperialism and colonialism, [and] has always been strongly opposed to hegemony".⁶³

The historical/colonial narrative also draws on stories about shared experiences during the Second World War. For example, in September 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Ambassador to Fiji Zhang Ping emphasised that: "[China] will never forget ... the contributions made by Fiji and other Pacific Island Countries who were members of world anti-fascist alliance".⁶⁴ In this context, drawing on

⁶⁰ Yong Huang, "Zhongguo zhu feiji dashi huang yong: Zhongguo meng qianshou taipingyang meng (Chinese Ambassador to Fiji, Yong Huang: The Chinese Dream joins hands with the Pacific Dream)," *Xi Jinping zhuxi taipingyang daoguo zhixing zhuankan* (Special Issue on President Xi Jinping's Visit to Pacific Island Countries), 2014, pp. 32–3.

⁶¹ Huang, "Zhongguo zhu feiji dashi huang yong (Chinese Ambassador to Fiji, Yong Huang)," p. 32; Bohua Xie, "Zhongguo zhu wanuatu dashi xie bohua: youyi jie shuoguo xieshou ying weilai (Chinese Ambassador to Vanuatu, Bohua Xie: Friendship Bears Fruit, Hand in Hand Towards the Future)," *Xi Jinping zhuxi taipingyang daoguo zhixing zhuankan* (Special Issue on President Xi Jinping's Visit to Pacific Island Countries), 2014, pp. 34–6.

⁶² Jinping Xi, "A Lasting True Friend of The People of Pacific Island Countries," *Fiji Sun*, 21 November 2014, <https://fijisun.com.fj/2014/11/21/a-lasting-true-friend-of-the-people-of-pacific-island-countries/>.

⁶³ Embassy of the PRC in Samoa, "Welcoming Remarks by Mme. Li Yanduan, Chinese Ambassador to Samoa at the 'China and the Pacific' Conference," 2 March 2015, http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdr/201503/t20150302_21943.htm.

⁶⁴ Embassy of the PRC in Fiji, "Remarks by Ambassador Zhang Ping at the Reception in Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the Victory of the World Anti-fascist War," 3 September 2015, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx/dsjh/201509/t20150904_1036111.htm.

China's broader global narrative of being a "responsible great power" (*fu zeren daguo*),⁶⁵ China was presented as playing an important role "in safeguarding world peace",⁶⁶ as "an active participant, constructor and contributor of the current international order and system"⁶⁷ dedicated to "maintaining world peace and regional stability".⁶⁸ That role was used as the basis for arguing that, reflecting a world structured around a division between formerly imperial and colonised states, China and Fiji were now responsible for "maintaining global and regional order" to have a "peaceful, stable, and favourable international environment" to improve national development.⁶⁹

Indeed, reflecting the implied division between formerly imperial and colonised states, Chinese leaders and officials frequently seek to emphasise that, following China's foreign policy of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China approaches Pacific countries guided by the principles of "cooperation", "mutual respect", "mutual trust", and respect for their independence.⁷⁰ For example, during his 2014 visit to Fiji, Xi met with the leaders of the (then) eight Pacific countries that had diplomatic ties with China to negotiate a strategic partnership. During his speech, Xi highlighted that:

China respects social system[s] and development path[s] independently chosen by each island country in line with their national conditions, supports them managing and deciding regional affairs in their own way, and backs them equally participating in international affairs and safeguarding their legitimate rights and interests.⁷¹

This emphasis on respect for Pacific countries' independence is presented in contrast to the USA, Australia, and other metropolitan powers. For example, in 2018 Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang commented that China acted in the region "with sincerity, real results, affinity, and good faith", while arguing that Australia acted as "a condescending master".⁷² In 2019, Xi told several Pacific leaders that China "pursues no selfish interest or so-called 'sphere of influence'" in the region.⁷³ In 2022 Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Xie Feng commented that:

⁶⁵ Consulate-General of the PRC in Adelaide, "2023 nian 4 yue 18 ri waijiao bu fayan ren Wang Wenbin zhuchi lixing jizhehui (On 18 April 2023, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Wang Wenbin Held a Regular Press Conference)," 18 April 2023, http://adelaide.china-consulate.gov.cn/wjbfyrth_6/202304/t20230418_11061086.htm; MFAPRC, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on 18 April 2023," 18 April 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202304/t20230418_11061179.html.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Embassy of the PRC in Fiji, "Address by His Excellency Ambassador Zhang Ping At the Reception in Celebration of the 66th Anniversary Of the Founding of the People's Republic of China," 29 September 2015, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx/dsjh/201509/t20150929_1036112.htm.

⁶⁸ Embassy of the PRC in Fiji, "Address by His Excellency Ambassador Zhang Ping".

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ MFAPRC, "Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Joe Natuman of Vanuatu," 17 August 2014, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2797_665439/3442_664940/3444_664944/201408/t20140819_591275.html; Consulate-General of the PRC in Surabaya, "Li Keqiang Holds Talks with Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama of Fiji, Stressing to Constantly Advance China-Fiji Strategic Partnership," 21 July 2015, http://surabaya.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/jrzg_2/201507/t20150721_5330610.htm; Embassy of the PRC in Fiji, "Remarks by Ambassador Qian Bo at the Deck Reception of Chinese Navy Hospital Ship Ark Peace," 6 August 2018, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx/dsjh/201808/t20180828_1036130.htm.

⁷¹ The Embassy of the PRC in New Zealand, "Xi Jinping Holds Group Meeting with Leaders of Pacific Island Countries and Delivers a Keynote Speech Building Strategic Partnership of Mutual Respect and Common Development and Together Realizing Dream of Development, Prosperity and Harmony," 22 November 2014, http://nz.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgykkgx/201412/t20141203_885211.html.

⁷² Embassy of the PRC in the Independent State of PNG, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on 20 August 2019," 20 August 2019, http://pg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/201908/t20190820_928430.htm.

⁷³ Embassy of the PRC in the Hellenic Republic, "Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Charlot Salwai of Vanuatu," 28 May 2019, http://gr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/201905/t20190530_3155267.htm.

Those who spread rumours, smear, slander, coerce, and intimidate others expose that they are still reluctant to give up their mania for colonisation in the 21st century ... racking their brains and trying to control Pacific Island countries to safeguard the so-called “sphere of influence”. The Pacific is the shared home of countries in the region, not some countries’ “backyard” or “territory”.⁷⁴

References to “sphere of influence” and “backyard” are intended to emphasise the story of a world structured around a division between formerly imperial and colonised countries, as it is an implicit criticism of Australia, where it is common to refer to the Pacific Island region as Australia’s “backyard”.⁷⁵ References to “territory” are similarly an implicit criticism of the US, which has territories in the region and frequently refers to itself as a “Pacific nation”. The language of sphere of influence (*shili fanwei*) is meaningful in China where it has a negative connotation due to its association with the efforts of western powers to colonise and exert influence over China in the late 19th century.⁷⁶

South–South Cooperation

The second narrative we identified, that of “South–South cooperation”, is an identity narrative that seeks to position China and Pacific countries as developing countries with shared stories, values, and goals. Drawing on the historical/colonial international system narrative, it continues to emphasise a world structured around a division between formerly imperial (global North) and colonised (global South) states. For example, Xi has emphasised that China respects and supports “the development path chosen independently by the Pacific people”⁷⁷ and opposes “great-power chauvinism”⁷⁸ and “long-term colonial plunder and geographical constraints”.⁷⁹ Therefore, as a fellow member of the global South, China claims to be willing to assist Pacific countries to pursue their goals on the international stage, as “all countries, big or small, rich or poor, strong or weak, are equal members of the international community”.⁸⁰

The South–South cooperation narrative is challenged by the gulf in economic size between China and Pacific countries. To counter this, President Xi Jinping has highlighted that “no matter how developed China is, it will always be a member of the developing countries and will always stand side by side with other developing countries”.⁸¹ On this basis Xi has encouraged Pacific countries to “board the express train of China’s development”.⁸² In an implicit critique of global North powers, which frequently attach governance or other conditionalities to their assistance, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed that “China has never interfered in other countries’ internal affairs, never attached political conditions to aid for other countries, and never targeted third parties”.⁸³

⁷⁴ Center for Pacific Island Countries Studies (CPICS), “Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng: What Rights Do These Countries Have to Make Unwarranted Comments on the Negotiation and Conclusion of the Framework Agreement on Security Cooperation between China and Solomon Islands?” *Pacific Islands Report*, No. 14 (2022), pp. 28–30.

⁷⁵ Joanne Wallis, “Contradictions in Australia’s Pacific Islands Discourse,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 5 (2021), pp. 487–506.

⁷⁶ Hongyun Wang, “‘Shili fanwei’ gainian kaoshi (Examination of the Concept of ‘Sphere of Influence’),” *Lanzhou Xuekan (Lanzhou Academic Journal)*, No. 1 (2007), pp. 178–81.

⁷⁷ The Embassy of the PRC in New Zealand, “Xi Jinping Meets with Some Leaders of Pacific Island Countries,” 22 November 2014, http://nz.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgykkgx/201412/t20141203_885207.html.

⁷⁸ Embassy of the PRC in the Hellenic Republic, “Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Charlot Salwai”.

⁷⁹ Huang, “Zhongguo zhu feiji dashi huang yong (Chinese Ambassador to Fiji, Huang Yong),” pp. 32–3.

⁸⁰ Xinhua Net, “China’s Top Legislator Meets Micronesian, Kazakh officials,” 24 April 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/24/c_137131739.htm; MFAPRC, “Wang Yi Meets with Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama of Fiji”.

⁸¹ MFAPRC, “China, Pacific Island Countries Lift Ties to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ MFAPRC, “Wang Yi: China’s Foreign Aid Can Stand the Test and the Judgment,” 31 October 2018, https://www.mfprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/3376_665447/3417_664890/3419_664894/201811/t20181102_587230.html.

Chinese diplomats use the South-South narrative to claim that China shares the values and goals of other states in the global South, including Pacific countries. For example, Chinese officials have expressed empathy with Pacific countries who have “borne the brunt” of climate change.⁸⁴ In September 2015, Chinese Ambassador to Papua New Guinea Du Qiwen emphasised to Pacific leaders China’s willingness to “play a constructive role in the international climate change negotiation and safeguard the common interests of developing countries”.⁸⁵ In November 2015, Zhang Ping published an article stating that: “Some of the small islands are even facing existential threat. Both being developing countries, China deeply empathizes with Pacific Island Countries about the adverse effects posed by climate change and has provided assistance, within its means”.⁸⁶ China has accordingly donated to the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme,⁸⁷ provided training on mitigating natural disasters for Pacific government officials,⁸⁸ and launched the China-Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Cooperation Center in April 2022.⁸⁹ China has also emphasised its claimed support for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),⁹⁰ which Pacific countries played a major part in negotiating. To support implementation of the SDGs, China has established a South-South Cooperation Fund for developing countries with an initial contribution of US\$2 billion.⁹¹ It has also forgiven some debt, agreeing in 2015 to forgive outstanding interest-free loans to certain least developed, landlocked, and small island developing countries.⁹²

China’s South-South cooperation narrative draws on the Chinese foreign policy concept of the “community of common destiny” (CCD). The CCD concept reflects the idea of “shared interests and destiny” between China and other states, as well as the necessity of “address[ing] common challenges in partnership”.⁹³ It has been drawn on to express China’s claimed wish to “maintain the status quo of the international order and has no intention to introduce fundamental changes”.⁹⁴ Xi emphasised the CCD concept for global governance at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017.⁹⁵ This concept has since been widely adopted by lower-level Chinese delegates. For example, in January 2018 Charge d’Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Fiji Gu Yu stated that the new bridges signify “‘bridges of future’ ... in addressing climate change and in building a

⁸⁴ Embassy of the PRC in Fiji, “Chinese Foreign Policy and China-Fiji Relationship—by Ambassador Zhang Ping in the University of South Pacific,” 1 June 2016, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx/dsjh/201606/t20160601_1036121.htm.

⁸⁵ Embassy of the PRC in PNG, “Remarks by H.E. Ambassador Du Qiwen at the 27th Post Forum Dialogue (PFD) of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF),” 15 September 2015, http://pg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zbgx/201509/t20150919_930025.htm.

⁸⁶ Embassy of the PRC in Fiji, “Addressing Climate Change: China on the Move—Ambassador Zhang Ping’s Article for The Pacific People,” 26 November, 2015, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx/dsjh/201511/t20151126_1036114.htm.

⁸⁷ Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, “PRC Provides Support For Enhanced Climate Action In The Pacific,” 2 December 2018, <https://www.sprep.org/news/peoples-republic-of-china-provides-support-for-enhanced-climate-action-in-the-pacific>.

⁸⁸ Dezheng Chen, “Zhongguo jiang jianli sange jigou xiezhu taipingyang daoguo fazhan (China will establish three institutions to assist the development of Pacific Island countries),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Zixun (Pacific Island News)*, No. 12 (2021), pp. 2–3.

⁸⁹ CIPCS, “Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng”.

⁹⁰ Denghua Zhang, “Pacific Island Countries, China & Sustainable Development Goals Part 1: Making the Most of Chinese Aid,” *State, Society & Governance in Melanesia In-Brief* 2017/14, https://bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2017-06/ib_2017_14_zhang_amended.pdf.

⁹¹ Guiyu Wang, “Tangjia” (Tonga),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 14 (2015), p. 177.

⁹² Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of Tonga, “Promote Cooperation, Enhance Development and Share Prosperity,” 29 December 2015, http://to.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/201512/t20151229_57439.htm.

⁹³ Denghua Zhang, “The Concept of ‘Community of Common Destiny’ in China’s Diplomacy: Meaning, Motives and Implications,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2018), p. 198.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Zhang, “The Concept of ‘Community of Common Destiny’ in China’s Diplomacy”.

community of shared future for mankind”.⁹⁶ In early 2018, two Chinese ambassadors also mentioned that, within the framework of South–South cooperation, China works alongside Pacific countries to promote the construction of the CCD concept.⁹⁷

Therefore, the South–South cooperation narrative builds on the historical/colonial narrative to further seek to justify China’s role in the Pacific region “as a major developing country”,⁹⁸ and to displace metropolitan power such as Australia and the USA.⁹⁹

The BRI

Our third identified strategic narrative is a policy narrative, based around China’s BRI, that frames China’s policy approach to the region as a natural progression of the two preceding narratives. This narrative sets out why the BRI is needed and desirable for Pacific countries, by positioning them as “a natural extension” of the BRI and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.¹⁰⁰ Since 2015, several Chinese government officials have presented the BRI as “new platform for South–South cooperation, which will provide new opportunities and impetus for cooperation between China and Pacific Island countries; the BRI will make a positive contribution to the realisation of the UN 2030 SDGs”.¹⁰¹ Accordingly, in 2018, Xi urged Pacific countries to “seize upon the opportunity” of signing and “jointly building the BRI” to facilitate better bilateral trade.¹⁰²

To counter American and Australian depictions of the BRI as a “debt trap”, Chinese officials present it as a desirable “opportunity” to escape the “underdevelopment” and “non-development trap”.¹⁰³ Chinese diplomats have said that the policy will create more opportunities for Chinese enterprises to invest in the Pacific, and that the Chinese government will carry out more aid projects.¹⁰⁴ Drawing on the BRI narrative, Chinese delegates have talked about deepening cooperation in the Pacific in various areas, such as infrastructure, trade, tourism, education,¹⁰⁵ agricultural and side-line products,¹⁰⁶ preferential loans,¹⁰⁷ and technical assistance projects.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, the BRI narrative seeks to align with the priorities of Pacific countries on issues such as “green development and

⁹⁶ The State Council Information Office, “China-aided Bridges Open in Fijian Capital, Cementing Bilateral Friendship,” 12 January 2018, http://english.scio.gov.cn/beltandroad/2018-01/12/content_50218631.htm.

⁹⁷ Guiyu Wang and Junchang Lyu, “Feiji (Fiji),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 23 (2018), pp. 69–71; Guiyu Wang and Junchang Lyu, “Wanu’atu (Vanuatu),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 23 (2018), p. 99.

⁹⁸ Embassy of the PRC in PNG, “Remarks by H.E. Ambassador Du Qiwen at the 27th PFD of the PIF”.

⁹⁹ Guiyu Wang and Junchang Lyu, “Zonghe Xiaoxi (Comprehensive News),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 16 (2016), pp. 211–13.

¹⁰⁰ Guiyu Wang, “Feiji (Fiji),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 14 (2015), p. 68; Guiyu Wang and Junchang Lyu, “*Taipingyang daoguo yanjiu zhongxin xinxi* (Information on Research Centre of Pacific Island Countries),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 21 (2017), p. 19.

¹⁰¹ Chinese Embassy in Fiji, “*Qian bo dashi chuxi nanman bezuo taipingyang quyue yantaohui*” (“Ambassador Qian Bo attends the South-South Cooperation Pacific Region Seminar”) 3 August 2019, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/sjxx/dshd/201903/t20190308_1023037.htm.

¹⁰² MFAPRC, “China, Pacific Island Countries Lift Ties”.

¹⁰³ Ting Liang and Junchang Lyu, “Feiji (Fiji),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 28 (2019), pp. 77–9.

¹⁰⁴ Guiyu Wang and Junchang Lyu, “Feiji (Fiji),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 20 (2017), p. 57; Yun Jiang and Junchang Lyu, “Wanuatu (Vanuatu),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 26 (2018), p. 95; Ting Liang and Junchang Lyu, “Babuyaxinjineiya (Papua New Guinea),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 28 (2019), p. 123.

¹⁰⁵ Wang, “*Tangjia* (Tonga),” pp. 164–5.

¹⁰⁶ Guiyu Wang, “*Zonghe xiaoxi* (Comprehensive News),” *Taipingyang Daoguo Yanjiu Tongxun (Research Newsletter of Pacific Island Countries)*, No. 14 (2015), p. 200.

¹⁰⁷ Wang and Lyu, “Feiji (Fiji),” p. 58.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

blue economy”¹⁰⁹ and with the “national development goals” of Pacific countries,¹¹⁰ while safeguarding “the legitimate interests of small and medium-sized developing countries”.¹¹¹

Case Study of Fiji

In May 2022, then Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama hosted Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his tour of the Pacific. The meeting was a warm one, and the two leaders reaffirmed the long-standing relationship between their two countries, noting the frequently referenced fact that Fiji was the first Pacific country to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1975.

Fijian leaders have long been some of the most active in the Pacific at seeking deeper ties with China. Former Prime Minister Lasenia Qarase visited China twice, and during his second visit in 2004 reaffirmed Fiji’s commitment to the “one-China policy” and that the “only relations” maintained with Taiwan would be “promotion of unofficial economic and commercial ties”. A joint communique Qarase signed during his visit stated the two countries were “ready to press ahead with official and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation on all fronts and at all levels in a bid to increase mutual understanding and friendship”.¹¹²

After Qarase was removed from office in a coup led by Bainimarama in 2006, relations between Fiji and China deepened. Not long after he seized power, Bainimarama expressed his confidence that, while other long-term partners such as the US, Australia, and New Zealand had condemned his actions, China “would always be there” because Fiji “always had close ties with Beijing”.¹¹³ This was Fiji’s third military coup, but unlike the two coups in 1987 led by Sitiveni Rabuka (and a civilian coup in 2000), the 2006 military coup received a more pronounced diplomatic reaction by traditional partners the USA, Australia, and New Zealand. Fiji was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum and Commonwealth in 2009, which created an opportunity for China to develop closer relations. Indeed, under Bainimarama’s leadership (2006–2022), relations between Fiji and China strengthened considerably, aided by the fact that China did not decry Fiji for the 2006 coup nor attempt to isolate it. This was despite leaked diplomatic cables showing Australia’s attempt to discourage then vice-president Xi Jinping from visiting Fiji in February 2009:

The Australian Ambassador told VFM [Vice-Foreign Minister] He Yafei that China should join international efforts led by the Pacific Forum to push Fiji toward democratic reform, but instead it seemed that China was using the opportunity to deepen ties with the country just when other countries were pulling back.¹¹⁴

Indeed, China seized the opportunity to deepen its relations with Fiji. Then Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping’s visit to Fiji in February 2009 resulted in several development assistance deals being signed with the interim Fijian government. After Fiji was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth, China reaffirmed its support, with then

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

¹¹⁰ Embassy of the PRC in Fiji, “To Create a New Splendid Future of China-Fiji Relationship—Speech by Ambassador Zhang Ping at the Symposium Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Ties between China and Fiji,” 6 November 2015, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/topic/jjsszn/201511/t20151106_984465.htm; MFAPRC, “Wang Yi Meets with Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama of Fiji”.

¹¹¹ MFAPRC, “Wang Yi Meets with Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama of Fiji”.

¹¹² Xinhua News Agency, “President Hu Meets Fijian PM,” 1 July 2004 <http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/99892.htm>.

¹¹³ “Bainimarama to Seek Support from China,” *The Age*, 30 December 2006, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/bainimarama-to-seek-support-from-china-20061230-gdp5ba.html>.

¹¹⁴ Michael Field, “NZ Shamed China over Fiji Visit – Wikileaks,” *Stuff.co.nz*, 28 April 2011, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/4934713/NZ-shamed-China-over-Fiji-visit-WikiLeaks>.

President Hu Jintao stating that: “The Chinese Government attaches great importance to the China–Fiji relations and considers Fiji a good friend and partner in the Pacific region”.¹¹⁵ This statement bestowed the legitimacy that Bainimarama sought at a time of diplomatic isolation and his appreciation was reflected in communiques and bilateral agreements in the years following. China was also an important partner in providing the platform and influence for Fiji’s increased international recognition. In 2010, Fiji joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and at the 2012 NAM Leaders’ Summit, Fijian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ratu Inoke Kubuabola stated that:

We have learned from our own experience that we should not give in to the bullying tactics by powerful states, who on one hand, claim to champion human rights and freedoms but on the other, have less to no regard for the rights of sovereign states to determine their own affairs consistent with the needs and aspirations of their peoples.

It is therefore imperative that we must not, at any time, condone any form of discrimination based on neocolonialist categorizations that make some inferior than others. Mr. Chairman, to do otherwise clearly undermines the founding principles and objectives of the Movement and of the UN Charter.¹¹⁶

Therefore, while Fijian leaders referenced Fiji’s colonial past, which has some resonance with China’s strategic narrative of a shared historical and colonial experience, they did so instrumentally to advance Fiji’s interest in broadening its diplomatic options in response to the isolation attempts of Australia and other partners following the 2006 coup. And Fiji managed to leverage these new diplomatic relationships effectively. It used its membership of the NAM as a platform from which to successfully push for selection as the chair of the G77 and China in 2013. With China’s support, Fiji also managed to secure significant positions at the United Nations, including Fijian diplomat Peter Thomson being elected as president of the General Assembly in 2016 and Fiji’s ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Nazhat Shameem Khan, being elected as president of the Human Rights Council in January 2021.

Recognising the value of deepening ties with China as a counter to the isolation efforts of Australia and other partners, the Fijian interim government adopted a “Look North” foreign policy to draw closer to China. Bainimarama emphasised that China “recognised their sovereignty” which was “very important” to Fiji.¹¹⁷ In addition, Bainimarama confirmed that China’s relationship with Fiji was “strengthened” because of the “opportunity” that presented itself after the “withdrawal of Australia and New Zealand”. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs acting permanent secretary Esala Nayasi pointed out that, “after not being able to sink [sic] well with traditional partners”, Fiji “strongly pursued the Look North Policy” which was a “turning point in foreign policy”.¹¹⁸ In 2011 the Fijian interim government signed a memorandum of understanding with China that allowed Fijian police officers to be trained in China and Chinese police officers to deploy to Fiji.

In 2014 Fiji returned to democracy, with elections held under the new 2013 Constitution. But while this created space for the USA, Australia, and other partners to re-engage more formally with Fiji, China was keen to ensure that it would not be sidelined. In the lead-up to the election, Vice Minister of the International Department of the Central Committee of

¹¹⁵ Fiji Government, “Peoples Republic of China Wishes Fiji a Happy Anniversary,” 15 October 2009, <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/News/Peoples-Republic-of-China-wishes-Fiji-a-happy-anniversary>.

¹¹⁶ Fiji Government, “Statement at the Non-Aligned Movement Leaders’ Summit – Kubuabola,” 3 September 2012, <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/Speeches/English/STATEMENT-AT-THE-NON-ALIGNED-MOVEMENT-LEADERS%e2%80%99SUM>.

¹¹⁷ “Frank Bainimarama Criticises Australia and New Zealand,” *Sky News Australia*, 3 March 2012.

¹¹⁸ “Suspension led to the Look North Policy,” *Fiji Times*, 25 February 2015.

the Communist Party of China Yu Hongjun stated that: “we respect the right of the people of Fiji to choose their development consistent with their own national characteristic and believe the people have the capability to move it forward in building their own future”.¹¹⁹

Shortly after the 2014 election, Sino–Fiji relations further developed, with a state visit by President Xi Jinping to Suva. At the state dinner, then Fiji President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau observed that: “during the past eight years we are indeed grateful that China has been constantly by Fiji’s side through thick and thin so to speak, and quietly nurturing the saying, ‘a friend in need is a friend indeed’”. And might I add that China is a friend indeed and more. Xi Jinping in his speech responded:

Our two countries have been respecting and supporting each other for common development and common progress. Now the seeds of friendship have bloomed and yielded fruits. I have brought with me on this trip, to Fiji, the friendly relations of the Chinese people towards the Fijian people. And the purpose of the visit is to deepen our traditional friendship, promote military beneficial between us, beneficial cooperation between us and also advance a shared lofty course of common development.¹²⁰

The continued strengthening of relations were hailed by then Prime Minister Bainimarama in 2015: “Fiji will never forget the support that China gave us ... While some of our traditional friends failed to understand our reform program and chose to punish us and damage our interests, China stood by us. And we will always remember – with immense gratitude – your understanding and support”.¹²¹ These statements highlight how Chinese and Fijian leaders used narratives of South–South cooperation and shared experiences of colonialism both to justify the deepening of their relationship and to differentiate it from more tense relations that Fiji had with Australia and other metropolitan partners following its 2006 coup. Yet Fijian leaders were not parroting Chinese narratives, but instead using them instrumentally to remind Australia and other traditional partners that Fiji had other diplomatic and development options, and consequently would not succumb to pressure to return to democracy until the Bainimarama regime was ready.

Fijian leaders have also adopted China’s BRI narratives. In 2017, Bainimarama was the only Pacific leader to attend the inaugural Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing. At this Forum, President Xi expressed “China’s willingness to boost coordination and cooperation with Fiji under the United Nations framework, and maintain communication and coordination on major issues such as climate change”.¹²² In 2018, Fiji signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation within the framework for the BRI. Fiji then received US\$500 000 in humanitarian aid from China after two tropical cyclones in 2021. The assistance was given “to strengthen the synergy of development strategies to jointly facilitate cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative”.¹²³

And, as noted, in May 2022 Bainimarama hosted Wang Yi in Suva. During his visit, Wang noted that China was “ready to enhance the synergy between the Belt and Road Initiative and Fiji’s 20-Year National Development Plan”.¹²⁴ But while Bainimarama gave Wang a

¹¹⁹ Hong’e Mo, “China Commends Fiji’s ‘Look North’ policy,” *Ecns.cn*, 20 January 2014, <http://www.ecns.cn/voices/2014/01-20/97737.shtml>.

¹²⁰ Fiji Government, “Chinese President Xi Jinping Hosted a State Dinner by Fijian President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau,” 22 November 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtXmWUj0lTw>.

¹²¹ Fiji Government, “Prime Minister Hails Fiji-China Relationship,” 16 July 2015, <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/News/PRIME-MINISTER-HAILS-FIJI-CHINA-RELATIONSHIP>.

¹²² Qiang Hou, “Fiji Vow to Strengthen Cooperation,” *Xinhua Net*, 16 June 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/16/c_136289588.htm.

¹²³ Fiji Department of Information, “Fiji Receives \$1m in Humanitarian Aid from China,” 30 March 2021, <https://www.fijitimes.com/fiji-receives-1m-in-humanitarian-aid-from-china/>.

¹²⁴ Embassy of The PRC in The Republic of Fiji, “Fijian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Josia Voreqe Bainimarama Holds Talks with Wang Yi,” 4 June 2022, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/tpxw_1/202206/t20220604_10698582.

warm welcome, he was simultaneously courting diplomatic overtures from Australia, the USA, and other partners. Recognising his ability to leverage this competing interests, Bainimarama used the BRI narrative to push back against China, seeking “stronger commitment from China on climate action” and observing that “geo-political point-scoring means less than little to anyone whose community is slipping beneath the rising seas”.¹²⁵ In response, in October 2022 two Fijian newspapers ran the same China National Day message aimed at reassuring Fijians of China’s commitment to addressing climate change:

President Xi proposed the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which aims at fostering a new type of security that replaces confrontation, alliance, and a zero-sum approach with dialogue, partnership, and win-win results... China takes very seriously the single greatest threat facing PICs, and believes that climate change is a common challenge that requires effort of everyone in the world.¹²⁶

Following the December 2022 national election, Bainimarama’s government was replaced by a coalition led by Sitiveni Rabuka. Since taking office, Rabuka has signalled his desire for Fiji to cool its relations with China. In January 2023 he stated that he saw “no need” for the 2011 memorandum of agreement on police exchange with China to continue, and has since confirmed that his government is considering whether to cancel the agreement entirely.¹²⁷ In March 2023, Rabuka’s government then announced that it would allow Taiwan to use its official name, Republic of China, for its representative office in Fiji. The office had been changed to Taipei Trade Office in Fiji in 2018 by Bainimarama, reportedly under pressure from China.¹²⁸ While the Chinese embassy in Fiji responded to the news with an admonishment that “we expect the Fijian side to firmly adhere to the one-China principle through concrete actions”,¹²⁹ and the Chinese ambassador published an opinion piece titled “Taiwan is Not and Has Never Been a Country”,¹³⁰ the Fijian government has stood firm, stressing that Fiji has a “friends to all, enemy to none” approach to its international relations.

Case Study of Solomon Islands

Wang Yi was also given a warm welcome during his May 2022 visit to Solomon Islands, where he met with Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and Foreign Minister Jeremiah Manele. Wang’s visit attracted considerable interest, because it followed Solomon Islands switching diplomatic recognition to China in September 2019.

htm#:~:text=China%20is%20ready%20to%20enhance,implement%20Juncao%20technology%20cooperation%20projects.

¹²⁵ Fiji Government, “PM Bainimarama’s Statement at the Joint Press Conference with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Li,” 30 June 2022, <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/News/PM-BAINIMARAMA-S-STATEMENT-AT-THE-JOINT-PRESS-CONF>.

¹²⁶ Embassy of The PRC in The Republic of Fiji, “Ambassador’s Message on the 73rd Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China,” 1 October 2022, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/mtj/202210/t20221001_10776450.htm.

¹²⁷ “Fiji Rethinks Police Deal with China amid Rising Pacific Tensions,” *The Guardian*, 7 June 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/07/fiji-rethinks-police-deal-with-china-amid-rising-pacific-tensions>.

¹²⁸ “Fiji Govt Will Again Use Taiwan’s Official Name,” RNZ, 29 March 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/486952/fiji-govt-will-again-use-taiwan-s-official-name>.

¹²⁹ Embassy of The PRC in The Republic of Fiji, “The Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Fiji Answers Relevant Questions from the FBC Journalist,” 4 May 2023, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sxw/202305/t20230504_11070319.htm.

¹³⁰ Jian Zhou, “Taiwan is Not and Has Never Been a Country,” *Fiji Sun*, 13 May 2023, http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sxw/202305/t20230513_11076903.htm.

“The switch” had not been a snap decision.¹³¹ In 1982 then Foreign Affairs Minister Ezekiel Alebua had visited China and recommended that Solomon Islands switch its recognition to China. However, this was rejected by then Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni.¹³² But the idea continued to be a live one, with Gordon Darcy Lilo, who was Prime Minister from 2011–2014, observing that Solomon Islands was at liberty to review its relationship with Taiwan and “explore other avenues”.¹³³

The idea of switching diplomatic relations gained momentum in early 2019, when then Prime Minister Ricky Houenipwela announced that his Democratic Alliance Party (DAP) would review Solomon Islands’ diplomatic relations with Taiwan if they were re-elected at the April 2019 national election.¹³⁴ He emphasised South–South cooperation and partnership as one of DAP’s foreign policies,¹³⁵ which reflected China’s growing importance to Solomon Islands.¹³⁶

After Houenipwela’s party fell short of forming government, new Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare decided to proceed with the switch, justifying it by pointing to the failure of traditional partners, including Taiwan, to progress the “national development objectives and sustainable development goals” of Solomon Islands since independence in 1978. He argued that Solomon Islands was better served making a decision that reflects its long-term development interests.¹³⁷ Indeed, contrary to much commentary in metropolitan powers, which claimed that China had engaged in “buying the Solomons’ change of mind”,¹³⁸ the decision to switch diplomatic recognition was a collective agenda of the Solomon Islands government based on a bi-partisan taskforce report.¹³⁹ When announcing the switch, Sogavare pointed out that his government’s decision to recognize the sovereignty of China reflected United Nations Resolution 2758, which was “supported by all UN countries except for 16 underdeveloped nations” and “our sovereign decision to sever the diplomatic relations is therefore consistent with International law”.¹⁴⁰ He also pointed to the potential developmental benefits of formal diplomatic relations with China, arguing that:

the future stability and well-being of Solomon Islands depends on our own ability to engage at the international level with development partners capable of advancing our national interests while we develop opportunities, strengthen our institutions, effectively manage resources and remain united in our quest for peace, prosperity, and progress in the future best interests of our country.¹⁴¹

Other Solomon Islands leaders have subsequently also pointed to the perceived economic benefits of engaging with China through the BRI.¹⁴²

¹³¹ Clive Moore, *Happy Isles in Crisis: The Historical Causes for a Failing State in the Solomon Islands, 1998–2004* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2004), pp.163–4.

¹³² Transform Aqorau, “Solomon Islands’ Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China,” in Smith and Wesley-Smith, eds., *The China Alternative*, pp. 320–1.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 325.

¹³⁴ Aqorau, “Solomon Islands’ Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China,” p. 321.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Manasseh Sogavare, “Statement by the Prime Minister Hon. Manasseh Sogavare on Switch to China,” *Solomon Times Online*, 20 September 2019, <https://www.solomontimes.com/news/statement-by-the-prime-minister-hon-manasseh-sogavare-on-switch-to-china/9362>.

¹³⁸ Michael Shoebridge, “Solomon Islands and Kiribati Switching Sides Isn’t Just About Taiwan,” *The Strategist*, 24 September 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/solomon-islands-and-kiribati-switching-sides-isnt-just-about-taiwan/>.

¹³⁹ Derek Futaiasi et al., *Lalaga, Tithiki, Talia vata: Pacific Islands Weaving Statecraft, Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security 02/2023* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2023).

¹⁴⁰ Sogavare, “Statement by the Prime Minister Hon. Manasseh Sogavare on Switch to China”.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² NPR reporter Ashley Waterman’s interview with Robson Tana Djokovic, Chief of Staff, Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (OPMC) and Dr Samson Viulu, Policy Secretary for Productive Sector, Policy Implementation Monitoring

While pointing to the developmental benefits of switching recognition to China, Sogavare also referred to a historical narrative about Solomon Islands' colonial past to critique Australia and other metropolitan powers and to justify his government's decision. During his announcement of the switch, Sogavare stated that:

As long as our decision is consistent with international law, Solomon Islands will not allow itself to be used as a tool to satisfy the narrow geopolitical interest of foreign political powers. I will not allow that to happen.

Solomon Islands is not a political football to be used by international interest groups that lack international credentials at the United Nations to achieve their narrow political or geopolitical interests.¹⁴³

Sogavare's reference to how metropolitan powers were perceived to have long pressured Solomon Islands resonates with China's historical/colonial strategic narrative. But rather than adopting this narrative due to influence from China, Sogavare instead instrumentalised it to put pressure on Australia and other metropolitan powers, who were (and still are) anxious about Solomon Islands' close relationship with China. This anxiety encouraged the USA to reengage with Solomon Islands, including by reopening the embassy that it had closed after the Cold War, proposing a National Transport Initiative, and re-establishing the Peace Corps program almost 20 years after its closure. Similarly, Australia increased its already considerable engagement with Solomon Islands, including by pledging A\$17 million to support Solomon Islands hosting the 2023 Pacific Games, and delivering police vehicles and rifles to Solomon Islands only weeks after Solomon Islands police officers travelled to China to undergo training for the first time.

Similarly, while Solomon Islands leaders have, at times, deployed South–South cooperation narratives, they have done so primarily in the context of their broader engagement with Pacific and Asian regional groupings, rather than specifically in relation to China. For example, when addressing the Asian-African Summit of Leaders in Jakarta in 2015, then Foreign Affairs Minister Milner Tozaka said that Solomon Islands valued South–South cooperation, as it will harness trade and investment for Solomon Islands and neighbouring Pacific countries. He welcomed investment initiatives in tourism, agriculture, and other productive sectors that will empower Solomon Islanders.¹⁴⁴ Rather than singling out China, Tozaka highlighted Solomon Islands' cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, and Timor-Leste on the Coral Triangle Initiative on coral reefs, fisheries, and food security as examples of the South–South cooperation.¹⁴⁵

Indeed, Solomon Islands has embraced pan-Pacific efforts at South–South cooperation. For example, Solomon Islands joined the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) that the Fijian government had instigated in 2012 following its 2009 suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum. The PIDF offered a regional forum for South–South cooperation (Australia and the USA were specifically excluded). At the 2019 PIDF Leaders' Summit, then Deputy Prime Minister of Solomon Islands John Maneniaru joined other Pacific leaders by endorsing the role of "South–South Cooperation in the Sustainable Development of the Pacific". In his speech, Maneniaru observed that: "The theme for this conference [South–South Cooperation for a resilient Pacific] provides the platform upon which we will explore new ways of thinking, working, and forging new partnerships between and amongst ourselves and with

and Evaluation Unit (PIMEU), OPMC, Honiara, Solomon Islands, which one of the authors facilitated in November 2019.

¹⁴³ Sogavare, "Statement by the Prime Minister Hon. Manasseh Sogavare on Switch to China".

¹⁴⁴ SIBC, "Tozaka Welcomes South-South Cooperation," 27 April 2015, *SIBC Online*, <https://www.sibconline.com.sb/tozaka-welcomes-south-south-cooperation>.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

our development partners to jointly pursue sustainable development and poverty eradication in the Pacific Islands".¹⁴⁶ Maneniaru also emphasized that the Pacific would benefit from a multi-stakeholder partnership in building long-term prosperity for the region.¹⁴⁷ But Maneniaru was not parroting China's narratives, as two months later he was among six members of the Sogavare coalition government who were terminated for either abstaining or voting against switching diplomatic ties to China.¹⁴⁸

Therefore, while Solomon Islands' leaders have used South-South narratives, they developed these narratives outside the context of Solomon Islands' relationship with China, and with reference to a wide range of partners from the global South. They have also used these narratives to encourage China to provide more support. For example, Special Envoy for the China-PIF Dialogue Wang Xuefeng addressed the Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting in 2019 and pledged that China would provide support to combat climate change and support the Forum's Blue Pacific strategy under the South-South cooperation framework.¹⁴⁹ Afterwards Sogavare pointedly expressed his appreciation for "China's care and support for the development of Pacific Island countries", labelling it as a "model of South-South cooperation."¹⁵⁰

In October 2019 Solomon Islands signed up to the BRI during Prime Minister Sogavare's visit to China.¹⁵¹ Sogavare described the BRI as bringing great opportunities for Solomon Islands on trade, investment, agriculture and fisheries, tourism, and other sectors.¹⁵² But while Solomon Islands signed up to the BRI, it has not passively adopted BRI narratives. Instead, narratives about the BRI have been co-constructed by China and Solomon Islands, since they embody "how the Pacific Islands intend to manage their interests on the regional geopolitical stage with many suitors".¹⁵³ Indeed, Sogavare has used the China relationship to access infrastructure development that could constitute valuable political capital for the 2024 national elections.¹⁵⁴ For example, China Railway Group is involved in the only active gold mine in Solomon Islands.¹⁵⁵ Solomon Islands also leveraged its membership of the BRI in the lead-up to hosting the 2023 Pacific Games to access infrastructure investment from China, with the main stadium and other sporting facilities built by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation and China Harbor Engineering Company.

While the Solomon Islands government, and particularly Prime Minister Sogavare, have instrumentally used narratives about the switch to China to leverage competition between Solomon Islands' partners, they have also been intended to influence its domestic audience. There was significant domestic opposition to the Sogavare's government decision to

¹⁴⁶ United Nations for South-South Cooperation, "Pacific Island Leaders Endorse a Central Role for South-South Cooperation in the Sustainable Development of the Pacific," 30 July 2019, <https://unsouthsouth.org/2019/07/30/pacific-island-leaders-endorse-a-central-role-for-south-south-cooperation-in-the-sustainable-development-of-the-pacific/>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ "Solomon's deputy PM reportedly sacked over Taiwan to China switch," RNZ, 1 October 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/400019/solomon-s-deputy-pm-reportedly-sacked-over-taiwan-to-china-switch>.

¹⁴⁹ Xuefeng Wang, "Statement by Wang Xuefeng, Special Envoy for the China-Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue at the 31st Forum Dialogue Partners Meeting," 16 August 2019, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/China-Statement.pdf>.

¹⁵⁰ "Chinese President Meets Solomon Islands PM, Pledging Closer Cooperation," *Xinhua Net*, 9 October 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/09/c_138458914.htm.

¹⁵¹ Denghua Zhang, "Domestic Political Reforms and China's Diplomacy in the Pacific: The Case of Foreign Aid," in Smith and Wesley-Smith, eds., *The China Alternative*, p. 270.

¹⁵² "Chinese President Meets Solomon Islands PM, Pledging Closer Cooperation".

¹⁵³ Henryk Szadziwski, "A Search for Coherence: the Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific Islands," in Smith and Wesley-Smith, eds., *The China Alternative*, p. 307.

¹⁵⁴ Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, "China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 2 December 2022, <https://gija.georgetown.edu/2022/12/02/china-solomon-islands-security-agreement-and-competition-for-influence-in-oceania/>.

¹⁵⁵ Zengpeng Tian, "China Railway Overseas Signed a Contract for the Solomon Islands Mineral Project," *Seetao Online*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.seetao.com/details/75670.html>.

switch diplomatic ties in 2019, with Malaita province, through its then premier Daniel Suidani, leading the fight. Suidani's dislike of China resulted in his provincial administration expelling all Chinese logging companies operating on Malaita.¹⁵⁶ Although this was justified based on these companies failing to pay license fees, it had significant implications, as China was the largest buyer of raw logs in the forestry industry.¹⁵⁷ Suidani also came up with his own "foreign" policy following the government's diplomatic switch in 2019, called the "Auki Communique", which sought a more assertive role for the province in managing its affairs, resources, and people in the light of the diplomatic switch.¹⁵⁸ However, Suidani lost office following a successful vote of no-confidence in the Malaita provincial assembly in February 2023, leading to claims that his removal was orchestrated by China.¹⁵⁹ But such interpretations overstated China's influence over the decision and underestimated the agency of Malaitans, particularly as most members of national parliament from Malaita are members of the Sogavare government, indicating the complexities of provincial politics.

Case Study of Samoa

During Minister Wang Yi's 2022 tour of the region, in late May he signed a bilateral agreement on behalf of China with Samoa.¹⁶⁰ The agreement promised "greater collaboration" between the two states, and while its terms have remained private, Samoa Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa commented that she and Wang Yi had discussed "climate change, the pandemic, and peace and security". A media release from the Samoan Government stated that China would continue to provide support for infrastructure development guided by a framework "to be determined and mutually agreed".¹⁶¹ But this agreement was not necessarily a diplomatic "win" for China. Only a week later (and less than two weeks after she had taken office after a change of government at the 21 May 2022 election), in a move the Australian media characterised as a "duel for influence",¹⁶² Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong visited Samoa. During her visit, Wong announced an eight-year partnership between Australia and Samoa to help advance human development, and a new maritime patrol boat for Samoa.¹⁶³ If there was a diplomatic "winner" from these two visits, it was Samoa.

This example highlights a dynamic that has long characterised Samoa's foreign policy: it is "one of the most assertive and outspoken countries in the region. Donors in particular fall over themselves to laud the Samoan example".¹⁶⁴ This assertiveness has been aided by

¹⁵⁶ Samie Waikori, "High Court Orders Stop to Logging Operations in Malaita," *Island Sun Online*, 3 June 2020, <https://theislandsun.com.sb/high-court-orders-stop-to-logging-operations-in-malaita/>.

¹⁵⁷ Catherine Wilson, "China-Solomon Islands Pact: Reading between the Lines," *The Interpreter*, 8 June 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-solomon-islands-pact-reading-between-lines>.

¹⁵⁸ Alfred Sasako, "Communique to be Axed," *Solomon Star*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/communique-to-be-axed/>.

¹⁵⁹ Cleo Paskal, "Former Malaita Premier (and Noted China Critic) Gets Bipartisan Support for US Visa," *The Diplomat*, 1 April 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/former-malaita-premier-and-noted-china-critic-seeks-us-visa/>.

¹⁶⁰ The Government of Samoa, "Press Release: Samoa Visit of the State Councilor and Foreign Minister of the Peoples' Republic of China H.E Mr. Wang Yi, 27-28 May 2022," 28 May 2022, <https://www.samoagovt.ws/2022/05/press-release-samoa-visit-of-the-state-councilor-and-foreign-minister-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-h-e-mr-wang-yi-27-28th-may-2022/>.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² "Samoa Signs China Bilateral Agreement During Pacific Push by Beijing," *The Guardian*, 28 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/28/samoa-signs-china-bilateral-agreement-during-pacific-push-by-beijing>.

¹⁶³ Australian High Commission Independent State of Samoa, "Joint Statement from the Hon Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa, Prime Minister of Samoa and Senator Penny Wong, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs," 2 June 2022, <https://samoa.embassy.gov.au/files/apia/Joint%20Statement%20-%20Visit%20by%20Minister%20Wong%20to%20Samoa%202-3%20June%202022.pdf>.

¹⁶⁴ Jack Corbett, "Palemia: A Memoir," *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2017), pp. 255–7, 255.

the fact that Samoa has been led by longstanding and highly experienced politicians, with former Prime Minister Tuilaepa Dr. Sailele Malielegaoi, who was also Foreign Minister, in office between 1998 and 2021. While current Prime Minister Fiamē, who is also Foreign Minister, only took over in 2021, she is a veteran politician, having been in Parliament since 1985, and Deputy Prime Minister under Tuilaepa's government for four years.

Samoa's assertiveness in its foreign affairs has meant that its leaders have not been persuaded to adopt China's historical/colonial narrative. This is partly because, while Samoa acknowledges its colonial past, it has strategically set out to redefine its own kingdom (*sāili malo*) removed from concepts of colonial oppression. While German, British, and American administrations shared control over the Samoan islands from 1889 to 1899 in a "tridominium", "Euro-American colonial strategy failed to exercise colonial power over Samoans".¹⁶⁵ The strong influence of Samoan leaders, the *fa'asamoa* culture, customs, and traditions, and the uneven and incomplete nature of Euro-American colonial power, made the tridominium a weak colonial state. Indeed, Samoa has a record of negotiating political outcomes on its own terms. For example, the successful syncretism between Western principles and traditional customs and protocols in Samoa's political system are often quoted as powerful symbol of the country's democratic achievements.¹⁶⁶

In the spirit of *sāili malo*, Tuilaepa emphasised sovereignty when discussing Samoa's relations with China, observing in a 2018 interview that: "the understanding between Samoa and China is that they respect our sovereignty and our independence for our own decision making".¹⁶⁷ Tuilaepa repeatedly emphasised sovereignty, for example observing that: "Samoa [seeks] China's support in areas that other traditional donors do not engage in, but Samoa considers as being vital to Samoa's development aspirations and nation building".¹⁶⁸ Fiamē has continued emphasising sovereignty, but has been more assertive in her approach to China. For example, shortly after taking office she cancelled a US\$100 million BRI-funded port project out of concerns about Samoa's indebtedness to China (which was US\$419.3 million out of total government debt of US\$1 billion in December 2021).¹⁶⁹ And, while she signed the bilateral development agreement with China in May 2022, she led the regional push against China's efforts to pursue a broader regional security and development agreement, arguing that regional matters must instead be discussed at the Pacific Islands Forum.¹⁷⁰ As Fiamē observed: "you cannot have a regional agreement when the region hasn't met to discuss it. And to be called to have that discussion and have an expectation that there would be a comprehensive decision or outcome was something that we could not agree to".¹⁷¹

While Samoa has adopted the term "developing country" in the context of its engagement with the United Nations, outside of that context it is reluctant to refer to itself in those terms. This was exemplified by Tuilaepa in a 2018 speech, in which he stated that: "we [Pacific Island countries] are susceptible to being characterised as countries that have little, and

¹⁶⁵ Holger Droessler, "Colonialism by Deferral: Samoa Under the Tridominium, 1889–1899," in Søren Rud, ed., *Rethinking the Colonial State (Political Power and Social Theory, Vol. 33)* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2017), pp. 203–24.

¹⁶⁶ Aupito Sio William, "Speech for the 56th Anniversary of Samoa's Independence," 4 June 2018, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/speech-56th-anniversary-samoa%E2%80%99s-independence>.

¹⁶⁷ "Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi's Interview with Savali Newspaper," *Savali Newspaper*, 13 January 2018, <https://m.facebook.com/savalineews/posts/1558832190904584/>.

¹⁶⁸ The Government of Samoa, "PM Opening Address at NUS Conference on China and Pacific," 25 February 2015, <https://www.samoagovt.ws/2015/02/pm-opening-address-at-nus-conference-on-china-and-pacific/>.

¹⁶⁹ Jonathan Barnett, "Samoa to Scrap China-packed Port Project under New Leader," *Reuters*, 20 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/samoa-shelve-china-backed-port-project-under-new-leader-2021-05-20/>.

¹⁷⁰ Lance Polu, "'No One Asked Us' — PM Fiamē on Geopolitics and the Pacific Region," *Talamua Online*, 31 May 2022, <https://talamua.com/2022/05/31/no-one-asked-us-pm-fiamē-on-geopolitics-and-the-pacific-region/>.

¹⁷¹ Hon Penny Wong, "Joint Press Conference — Apia, Samoa," 2 June 2022, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/transcript/joint-press-conference-apia-samoa>.

that we should be grateful for whatever is offered to us...I see us increasingly empowered to reject this characterisation".¹⁷² Samoa's rejection of this terminology has meant that China's efforts to use its strategic narrative of South–South cooperation have achieved little traction in Samoa.

However, Tuilaepa did adopt some of China's language relating to its BRI. For example, after Samoa was the first Pacific country to sign onto the BRI, in a 2018 interview he said that: "the Belt and Road Initiative is opening a vast market and bringing lots of opportunity for the world, particular[ly] for the small countries like Samoa".¹⁷³ This is not surprising, given that China's assistance to Samoa under the BRI, and its development program more broadly, includes infrastructure projects, sports, agriculture, education, and health.¹⁷⁴ However, as noted, Fiamē has sought to distance her government from Chinese lending and the BRI.

While Tuilaepa spoke warmly about China's BRI, this did not necessarily mean that he and his government have been persuaded by China's worldview. Indeed, while Samoa signed on to the BRI, Tuilaepa was one of the primary advocates for a counter-narrative developed by the Pacific Islands Forum, that of the "Blue Pacific". Tuilaepa was the first Pacific leader to use that narrative during a speech at the United Nations in 2017, in which he explained that it sought to "re-capture the collective potential of our shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean based on an explicit recognition of our shared 'ocean identity', 'ocean geography', and 'ocean resources'. It aims to strengthen collective action as one 'Blue Pacific continent'".¹⁷⁵ Samoa hosted the Forum leaders' meeting that year, which endorsed the Blue Pacific narrative as the region's long term foreign policy commitment.¹⁷⁶ Importantly, Tuilaepa and other Pacific leaders, particularly former Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor, have used the Blue Pacific narrative to push back against encroachment by China and other powers.¹⁷⁷ For example, during a 2018 speech, Tuilaepa observed that "under the flagship of our Blue Pacific identity, we are building a collective voice amidst the geopolitical din", as the Blue Pacific narrative "represents our recognition that as a region, we are large, connected and strategically important".¹⁷⁸ With this in mind, in a later speech, he cautioned the region's partners by observing that: "Genuine, durable, and transparent partnerships are very important to our region. Partnerships that respect the integrity and sovereignty of our members to decide freely on who their partners are and whose contribution is provided on

¹⁷² Tuilaepa Sialele Malielegaoi, "Speech by the Hon Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sialele Malielegaoi on Pacific Perspectives on the New Geostrategic Landscape," 30 August 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/speech-hon-prime-minister-tuilaepa-sialele-malielegaoi-pacific-perspectives-new>.

¹⁷³ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Independent State of Samoa, "Interview: China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative Provides Opportunities for South Pacific Island Nations: Samoan PM," 15 October 2018, http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zsgx/201810/t20181022_22219.htm.

¹⁷⁴ Samoa Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Bilateral Development Cooperation," <https://www.mfat.gov.ws/bilateral-development-cooperation/>.

¹⁷⁵ Pacific Islands Forum, "Remarks by Hon. Tuilaepa Lufesolai Sialele Malielegaoi Prime Minister of the Independent State of Samoa at the High-Level Pacific Regional Side Event by PIFS on Our Values and Identity as Stewards of the World's Largest Oceanic Continent, The Blue Pacific," 5 June 2017, <https://www.forumsec.org/2017/06/05/remarks-by-hon-tuilaepa-lufesolai-sialele-malielegaoi-prime-minister-of-the-independent-state-of-samoa-at-the-high-level-pacific-regional-side-event-by-pifs-on-our-values-and-identity-as-stewards/>.

¹⁷⁶ Pacific Islands Forum, "Forty-Eighth Pacific Islands Forum Communiqué," September, 2017, https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Final_48-PIF-Communique_2017_14Sep17.pdf.

¹⁷⁷ Wallis, Koro, and O'Dwyer, "The 'Blue Pacific' Strategic Narrative".

¹⁷⁸ Malielegaoi, "Speech by the Hon Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sialele Malielegaoi on Pacific Perspectives on the New Geostrategic Landscape".

a non-interventionist basis”.¹⁷⁹ Fiamē has continued to adopt the Blue Pacific narrative,¹⁸⁰ particularly to emphasise the importance of Pacific regionalism, observing that Samoa sees the Blue Pacific as a “powerful political bloc and a viable sustainable region”.¹⁸¹

Tuilaepa and other Pacific leaders have also used the Blue Pacific narrative to seek to influence partner states, including China, to take seriously the region’s security priorities, particularly climate change. For example, Tuilaepa has stated that: “Under the Blue Pacific identity, we are asserting our common values and concerns, and building our collective voice amid the geopolitical din on the existential threat of climate change that looms for all of our Pacific family”.¹⁸² This highlights how Pacific countries are not passive targets of attempts to use strategic narratives to influence them, but can instead deploy narratives of their own to both resist attempts at influence and to seek to influence the influence seeker. Therefore, Samoan leaders have not adopted China’s narratives, preferring to instead to promote the alternative Blue Pacific narrative to emphasise Samoa’s sovereignty, equality with its partners, and the importance of Pacific regionalism.

Conclusion

China has deployed three relatively consistent strategic narratives in the Pacific Islands over the last decade. It has built on its narrative of shared historical and colonial experience to support its narrative of the value of South–South cooperation, which it has used, in turn, to justify its narrative of the opportunities offered under its BRI. While many Pacific Island countries have been receptive to China’s growing interest, particularly its infrastructure lending and investment, they have been less receptive to its narratives and China has therefore not succeeded in re-ordering the region to alter Pacific countries’ perceptions and agendas. As we have shown, the leaders of three key Pacific countries have selectively adopted China’s narratives when justifying their foreign policies to advance their own interests, rather than those of China. Fiji has arguably been the most enthusiastic adopter of the historical/colonial and South–South cooperation narratives, with Prime Minister Bainimarama, who lost office in December 2022, instrumentalising these narratives to push back against efforts by the US, Australia, and New Zealand to isolate his regime following the 2006 coup. Any benefits for China from Bainimarama’s use of these narratives, in terms of placing pressure on traditional metropolitan powers, were incidental. Solomon Islands leaders have also instrumentally drawn on China’s narratives, with Prime Minister Sogavare deploying historical/colonial and South–South cooperation narratives to send messages to Solomon Islands’ traditional metropolitan powers and to leverage greater support from both them and China. Again, Sogavare’s use of these narratives, and indeed his government’s decision to switch diplomatic recognition to China, was primarily to advance the Solomon Islands government’s interests, with any benefits to China again incidental. Samoa has also selectively drawn on China’s narratives, particularly relating to the BRI, but has been more reluctant to engage with historical/colonial and South–South cooperation narratives, as they do not resonate with its master narratives about its identity and historical

¹⁷⁹ Pacific Islands Forum, “Remarks by the Prime Minister, Hon. Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, Outgoing Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum,” 3 September 2018, <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/04/remarks-by-the-prime-minister-hon-tuilaepa-sailele-malielegaoi-outgoing-chair-of-the-pacific-islands-forum/>.

¹⁸⁰ Fiamē Naomi Mata’afa, “Accelerating Actions for a Blue Pacific,” 8 September 2021, <https://www.sprep.org/news/honourable-fiamē-naomi-mataafa-prime-minister-of-samoa-statement-at-the-accelerating-actions-for-a-resilient-blue-pacific-panel-2-ocean-and-pollution-8-september-2021>.

¹⁸¹ “Address by the Honourable Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi at the Global Focus Summit, Auckland New Zealand,” 24 February 2020, <https://www.samoagovt.ws/2020/02/address-by-the-honourable-prime-minister-tuilaepa-sailele-malielegaoi-at-the-global-focus-summit-auckland-new-zealand/>.

¹⁸² Pacific Islands Forum, “Remarks by the Prime Minister, Hon. Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, Outgoing Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum”.

experience. While a casual reading of the discourse of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa's leaders might suggest that they have adopted some of China's narratives, a deeper reading reveals that this has been done selectively and instrumentally to advance their interests, rather than China's.

Therefore, our analysis demonstrates the value of attempting to examine the reception of strategic narratives, which, in turn, highlights the risk of over-interpreting their impact. As our analysis shows, China's narratives have not been adopted wholesale by Pacific countries, nor have they necessarily influenced how those countries have behaved. Instead, those narratives have been instrumentalised by Pacific countries, revealing the importance of accounting for the agency of the audience of strategic narratives. Our analysis also illustrates the importance of contextual and cultural analysis of the receptivity of narratives. Importantly, our analysis of China, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Samoa's official discourse has been conducted by nationals of those countries, who have the linguistic and cultural skills necessary to understand and interpret how narratives are being articulated, for what meaning, and with what intent.

While our analysis suggests that narrative power is more limited than it is often assumed, it does suggest that the audiences most influenced by strategic narratives might not be the direct targets of those narratives. Indeed, China's narratives in the Pacific Islands region, as well as their instrumental adoption by Pacific countries, have motivated changes in the policies and narratives of metropolitan powers. As noted, in response, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and other metropolitan powers have each articulated counter-narratives and increased their expenditure of material resources. Therefore, while scepticism has been expressed about China's narratives being "slogans"¹⁸³ or "cheap talk",¹⁸⁴ they do seem to generate effects—and because talk is cheap, they might be a very cost-effective tool of indirect influence.

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¹⁸³ Zeng, *Slogan Politics*.

¹⁸⁴ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng, "Introduction," in Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Zeng, eds., *One Belt, One Road, One Story?*, pp. 1–16, 9.